



Education in Turkey: Actors and Practices

Conference Dates: October 9–10, 2025, Istanbul

Submission Guidelines:

Paper proposals, including the title and an abstract (maximum of 500 words), along with a short biographical note, must be submitted by April 20, 2025, to

educationinturkey.symposium@gmail.com

All papers will undergo a review process, and the results will be announced by June 2025.

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Education, both under the Ottoman Empire and in modern Turkey, has consistently been a highly politicized domain. It has served as a strategic tool for social engineering and the construction of national identity (Alkan, 2000; Üstel, 2004). The creation of new schools intended to train elites was a central pillar of Ottoman reforms (Georgeon, 1994). With an exclusively secular educational system considered a free public service, republican elites saw schools as a key for socialization and learning national norms (Copeaux, 1997; Üstel, 2004). After the 1980 coup, education was reoriented to align with market demands (Unal, 2005; Kaplan, 2006), with national security courses becoming mandatory at all levels of schooling (Kaya, 2015). In the 2000s, in a context of European harmonization and international market integration the AKP (Justice and Development Party) engaged in numerous reforms (Altinyelken & al, 2015), considering education as a key institution in the project of forming a "new Turkey" (Pérouse, 2015; Nohl, Somel 2020).

Since the AKP's rise to power, the education sector has become a political battleground. Despite strong opposition from national education bodies (Yilmaz, 2012), the AKP initially overcame resistance through an alliance with the F. Gülen religious community.

The subsequent rupture in 2013 and Gülen movement's marginalization following the 2016 coup attempt had significant sectoral repercussions. Education emerged as an ideological arena through reforms, targeting the formation of a "pious youth" (Gençkol Eroler, 2020), including curriculum changes and new courses about the coup attempt. Controversial reforms like lifting the university headscarf ban in 2008 and equalizing secular and religious educational tracks in 2012 intensely divided societal discourse. These internal dynamics intersect with international influences. National educational reforms reflect pressures and recommendations from the OECD and European Union (Altinyelken, 2011, 2015), particularly as the Turkish government seeks to expand its global influence through educational policy.

Despite recent contributions like F. Gök's work (2024), social science research on education in Turkey remains fragmented, with limited critical and empirical analysis. Existing studies (Nohl, Akkoyunlu-Wigley, Wigley, 2008) predominantly focus on state reforms, neglecting diverse educational actors' practices. While emerging works increasingly explore socio-economic and cultural transformations linked to educational policies (Emanet 2023, Gök 2024), significant research gaps persist, particularly regarding marginalized populations and intersectionality. Beyond evaluating reforms and persistent challenges (ISCASS, 2019; Osmanoğlu & Lüküslü, 2023), the aim of this conference is to provide a comprehensive overview of Turkey's current education landscape, and to explore structuring historical and contemporary issues. It invites multidisciplinary perspectives (history, social sciences, political sciences, educational studies) to examine the political conditions and effects of school institutions across primary, secondary, and higher education levels.

This conference will explore three main axes:

I. Reforms in the Education System and Socio-Political Reconfigurations

The AKP's educational reforms (of which *2024 Türkiye Maarif Modeli Müfredatları*, or *2024 Öğretmenlik Meslek Kanunu* are the latest in a long list) developed within a complex, multidimensional context involving various actors with diverse and shifting interests and perspectives. This first axis explores the reforms through the lens of how institutions intertwine with social and political logics (Gourisse, Erdiñ, 2022), focusing on 3 dimensions:

1. Power Vectors: Examining how and with which resources, community associations, religious groups, and economic circles penetrate and consolidate their influence in the education sector. When and how does the government strategically target and encourage specific actors' involvement, and how are international references incorporated into reforms?

2. (Re)configurations of socio-political power: What are the outcomes of the reforms in terms of construction, consolidation, and potential weakening of existing socio-political power structures? Which actors were promoted or marginalized? How have boundaries between public and private, formal and informal education actors been transformed? How does the transnational dimension play a role in these reconfigurations (exemplified by the Maarif Foundation's international takeover of Gülenist schools, Angey, 2022)?

3. Transformation of the education system: How and to what extent is it affected by meeting the expectations of the different interest groups upon which the government relies. How does the recruitment system for educational and administrative staff function? What role do academic criteria or resources play compared (or in relation) to political and/or economic considerations?

II. The political, ideological and identity-related challenges of educational reform in Turkey

This axis explores the ideological and identity dimensions of recent educational reforms in Turkey, examining their impact on pedagogical practices and social dynamics. Since the Republic's founding, the Turkish education system has been a key space for national projects, balancing secular modernization and cultural preservation. While previous research has analyzed state ideology's curriculum effects (Copeaux, 2000; Kaplan, 2006; Caymaz, 2011) and militarism in school textbooks (Altınay, 2004; Kancı, 2007), the AKP-era reforms have been less studied in terms of their (political) socialization processes (Can, 2022; Özgür, 2012).

1. Identity construction: Our objective is to examine the role of education in identity construction within a context of increasing polarization between secular and religious values. We aim to evaluate how the strengthening of religious education (expansion of *imam-hatip* schools, revision of school textbooks to reflect a more conservative vision of history and national values, introduction of religious content) signals a potential shift from secularism to religious nationalism (Sen & Starkey, 2019).

2. Curricula: A key focus is analyzing the exclusion of evolutionary theory from primary and secondary science curricula, and its impact on national, ethnic, religious, and gender identity construction. How do curricula, textbooks, and daily practices shape conceptions of national identity, citizenship, and social roles (Aratemur Çimen, Bayhan, 2018)? How do school rituals and practices reproduce, or challenge embedded social hierarchies? What are the effects on gender perceptions and equality? What compromises or resistances emerge among educational actors facing ideological tensions?

3. Profession: The biography and sociological characteristics of teachers in the pre-university educational system, their training and their professional life are elements that are generally marginalized and deserve to be analyzed (Nohl, Somel, 2018).

III. Inequalities in School Pathways and Stratification Dynamics in Turkey's Education System

This axis explores educational inequalities in today's Turkey, analyzing interactions between socio-economic, cultural, and institutional dynamics and considering the agency of the pupils and their family.

1. Territorial Inequalities: Today growing inter-school disparities, coupled with school choice policies and incentives for private schools, have increasingly brought intra-regional inequalities to the forefront. Indeed, the school a student attends has become a more significant determinant of educational achievement than the broader region in which the school is situated (Gultekin and Yildiz, 2023). Still, significant disparities exist especially in eastern and southeastern areas. Although Turkey has signed international conventions on the right to education in mother tongue, the lack of regulations in line with these conventions leads to low literacy rates, especially in Kurdish and Arabic-speaking regions (Zeydanlioğlu, 2012; Arayıcı, 2000). What are the factors other than language? Additionally, the disparities between rural and urban areas merit further investigation, particularly in terms of infrastructure, resource allocation, and access to quality education. How do educational policies impact regional disparities?

2. Private/Public sector. The growth of the private sector in both schools and universities suggest the need to observe how public-private relations influence inequalities especially from a territorial and social point of view.

3. Turkish citizens/foreigners : The significant presence of foreigners with international protection status, labor migrants both documented and undocumented, suggests observing how their children are inserted into the educational system, both public and private. Furthermore, the growth of "International schools" aimed at foreign students that equally welcomes the upper-middle class Turkish citizens is a phenomenon that deserves to be analyzed.

4. Gender-based Inequalities: Patriarchal norms, domestic responsibilities, and poverty disproportionately affect girls' education, particularly in marginalized regions (Kirdar, 2009). These disparities persist even in developed areas, influenced by economic and institutional factors (Gumus & Chudgar, 2015). What are the recent developments in addressing intersectional gender inequalities in education, and what outcomes have emerged from efforts to remove barriers for girls in an increasingly conservative sociocultural context?

5. Selection & Meritocracy: The centralized exam system, grounded in multiple-choice assessments, disproportionately favors students with access to economic and cultural capital (Somel, 2019). The transformation of dershanes into private high schools further underscores systemic biases. What family strategies are deployed to navigate this inequitable system? And what are the academic outcomes of a selection mechanism frequently reshaped by governmental policies?

6. Higher Education Massification: Rapid proliferation of public and private universities has increased educational access. However, marginal returns remain low (Polat, 2017), and elite private universities primarily serve wealthy families. This raises critical questions about whether the expansion of higher education reduces or exacerbates existing inequalities, particularly regarding socio-economic accessibility and the quality of education offered.

These dimensions invite critical examination of how institutional structures perpetuate or challenge social stratification in the Turkish education system.

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